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YOUNG CHILDREN'S GOD CONCEPTS: INFLUENCES OF ATTACHMENT AND RELIGIOUS SOCIALIZATION IN A FAMILY AND SCHOOL CONTEXT

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Abstract

This contribution offers an overview of two studies testing two attachment theoretical correspondence hypotheses in the prediction of individual differences in young children's God concepts. The correspondence hypothesis supposes that people's view on God parallels their images of their early caregiver-child relationship. The revised correspondence hypothesis incorporates caregiver religiosity and socialization. In the first study support was found for the correspondence hypothesis in the school context examining 72 preschoolers. In the second study the revised correspondence hypothesis was partly confirmed among 198 kindergarteners. Children cognitively learn about a powerful and comforting, helping God in their homes and schools, even when all relationships with their caregivers are experienced as negative. However, in such a surrounding they do not emotionally learn about an intimate, personal bond with God.

INTRODUCTION

Although the early years of childhood have been the subject of intense psychological study, relatively little research has been undertaken regarding the beginnings of religion (Hyde 1990; Tamminen 1991). Insights into early religious development has tended to concentrate on age differences in religious concepts, focusing mainly on the role of cognitive development in the religious domain (Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1997). The present article will focus on antecedents of individual differences in one aspect of religious concepts, namely God concepts. With God concepts we allude to subjects' ideas concerning different potential behavioral characteristics of God, like God as a caring, loving, potent, and/or punishing entity (cf. De Roos et al. 2004; Dickie et al. 1997). It is proposed that attachment relationships and

religious socialization in a home and school context may provide insight into the origins of differences in young children's God concepts.

We conducted two studies into attachment theory to explore effects of parent-child and teacher-child relationship and of religious socialization on young children's God concepts. Originally, attachment theory as formulated by Bowlby (1969, 1973) and extended by Ainsworth and colleagues (1978) has been used to describe normative aspects of infants' adaptation and to forecast concurrent and prospective correlates in children's cognitive, socioemotional, and personality development (cf. Matas et al. 1978; Main and Weston 1981; Suess et al. 1992; Verschueren and Marcoen 1999).

The caregiver-child attachment relationship refers to the enduring emotional tie between child and caregiver that develops during the first year of life and continues to evolve during toddlerhood and beyond (Bowlby 1969). At the end of the first year, "secure" and "insecure" patterns of attachment can be distinguished. In a secure attachment relationship the child is able to use the attachment figure as a "safe haven" when distressed and as a "secure base" from which exploration is undertaken. When distressed, the child's attachment system is activated, which can be seen in attachment behaviors such as crying, seeking comfort, and pick-up gestures. After having reassured that the attachment figure is available, they easily can return to exploration. There is an optimal balance between exploration and attachment behaviors in securely attached children. Insecure attachment is characterized by an imbalance in organization of explorative and contact-seeking behaviors (Ainsworth et al. 1978). The insecure avoidant children seem to have a deactivated attachment system. They (defensively) explore at the expense of attachment behaviors. The insecure ambivalent or resistant children are not apt to explore, instead frequently clinging passively to the caregiver. When distressed, they mix contact-seeking behaviors with an often angry refusal to accept the caregiver's provision of it (Granqvist 2002a, 12). Attachment theory assumes that differences in attachment quality are the product of the history of caregiver-child interaction, and have an important effect on the child's future development (Bowlby 1969). The link between attachment relationships and children's future development is thought to be mediated by children's "internal working models." Bowlby (1973) claimed that a child develops working models of self and of others in the context of first attachments. Internal working models are mental representations of self and significant others that are derived from a variety of experienced and observed interactions of the child with

his or her caregivers. These mental representations come to govern the child's perceptions and behavior in new settings and relationships (Bretherton 1985), for example, in their relationship with God. Securely attached children will form more positive models of self and others than the insecurely attached children because they generally have experienced more sensitive care than the latter ones. Others are viewed as available and trustful and the self is conceptualized as worthy of care (Sroufe 1988). Insecure avoidant and ambivalent children generally have been rejected by their caregivers and given inconsistent care, respectively, which has a negative impact on their working models.

Recently, attachment theory has been empirically applied to individual differences in God concepts and other elements of adults' and adolescents' religiosity (Kirkpatrick 1995). First, the original correspondence hypothesis was derived from attachment theory, assuming that people's view on God parallel their images of their early caregiver-child relationship (cf. Kirkpatrick 1999). People with a less optimal early caregiver-child relationship should have developed a more negative, stern, punishing, and less positive, loving, comforting concept of God than people who had a more optimal relationship with their caregiver(s) in early childhood because they have formed more negative internal working models. Supporting this hypothesis, Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1992) found that people with a secure attachment history were likely to have an image of a loving and caring, as opposed to a distant, God.

Based on empirical and conceptual considerations, this original correspondence hypothesis has been revised (Granqvist 2002b; Granqvist and Hagekull 1999). The initial studies on attachment and religiousness (e.g., God concepts) showed that parental religiousness moderated the effects of attachment on aspects of religiousness, whereas main effects of attachment were generally weak or non-existent (cf. Granqvist 1998). A revision of the original correspondence hypothesis was theoretically motivated on the basis of the findings that securely attached children are more successfully socialized into parental standards in general (Granqvist 1998). Therefore, the revised correspondence hypothesis incorporates caregiver religiosity and socialization in the prediction of God concepts and other aspects of religiosity (Granqvist 1998, 2002b). The revised correspondence hypothesis supposes that secure childhood attachment forms God concepts through the socialization process itself. The God concepts of securely attached persons should correspond to their attachment

figure's God concepts, rather than to the security of their relationship. That is, securely attached children are more likely to be successfully socialized and brought up into and subsequently adopt parts of the attachment figure's system of religious behaviors and beliefs than insecurely attached children (Granqvist and Hagekull 1999). Evidence for the revised correspondence hypothesis among adults has been reported by, for example, Granqvist (2002b). The present study investigates the revised correspondence hypothesis including two aspects of religious socialization, that is, caregivers' God concepts and their goals for religious education.

Remarkably, attachment as well as religious socialization has hardly been related to young children's God concepts. Although past work on the relationship between attachment theory and God concept formation has relied on adult and adolescent samples, it was chosen to study kindergartners for several reasons.

First, because God concepts are likely to be formed early in life and probably exert great influence on later religious inclinations (Kirkpatrick 1999). Second, young children are at home a lot and are strongly dependent on their parents. Therefore, we might expect early parent-child attachment to be even more strongly related to children's God concepts than to adults' God concepts. Third, attachment theoretical hypotheses in the field of religion concentrate on early attachment whereas in empirical research only adults were assessed employing retrospective measures of parent-child attachment or measures of concurrent partner-adult relationships. The former methods rely heavily on adults' memories, which may yield distorted views. Assessing young children makes it possible to measure early attachment relationships directly and clearly. Fourth, when entering kindergarten for the first time a major transition is made by the child from the home to the school context. Both environments probably will exert influence on children's religious development but it has hardly been investigated what the relative effects of both environments on children's God concepts will be. Entering kindergarten, the teacher is a potential secondary attachment figure. The teacher-child relationship has shown to be important for children's cognitive and socioemotional competence in school (cf. Howes et al. 1994) and may be important for children's God concepts as well. Finally, kindergarten-age children already have formed some rudimentary God concepts that they are somewhat able to communicate (cf. De Roos et al. 2001a, 2003).

Summarizing, two attachment theoretical hypotheses in the prediction of individual differences in young children's God concepts will

be investigated, that is, the *correspondence hypothesis* (Study 1 and 2) and the *revised correspondence hypothesis* (Study 2).

STUDY 1

In the first study we tested the original correspondence hypothesis among 72 kindergarteners and examined the effects of the mother-child attachment relationship as well as the quality of the teacher-child relationship on children's concepts of self, others, and God (De Roos et al. 2001b). It was expected that children with a less optimal caregiver-child relationship would have a more negative, stern, punishing, and less positive, loving, comforting concept of God than children experiencing a more optimal relationship with their caregiver(s). The mechanism by which this continuity or coherence in development is manifest is postulated through the person's construction of representational mental models, or internal working models of him or herself and others (cf. Kirkpatrick and Shaver 1992). Thus, the relation of attachment with God concept is thought to be mediated by working models of self and others. That is, children having faulty relationships with their caregivers will develop a more negative and less positive concept of God than children having positive relationships because the former have formed a more negative concept of self and others.

Method Study 1

Subjects were 36 boys and 36 girls (mean age 63 months) coming from non-affiliated (62.5%) and liberal Protestant (37.5%) families in a medium-sized city in the Netherlands. They were randomly selected from a public and Protestant school. All children were interviewed individually by a female experimenter in a 30-minute session to assess their God concepts, working models, and attachment representations. The children were taken from their kindergarten classes to a separate room.

Children's Concepts of God. We used a 23-item questionnaire to measure children's God concepts. The items are intended to involve different possible characteristics of God, like God is strict, God punishes, God is very strong, God is loving, and God is comforting. The items were read by a female experimenter. Children rated each item on a three-point scale (no: 1 point; sometimes: 2 points; or yes: 3 points).

Using factor analysis children's answers resulted in two scales, called *loving God* (God loves me, God makes me happy, God is my friend, God listens to you, and You can ask God anything you like) and *punishing God* (God punishes often, God punishes when you are naughty, God scares me, God is angry when you do something bad, God is strict, and God is not nice).

Children's Concepts of Self and Others. The pictorial scale of perceived competence and social acceptance for young children (Harter and Pike 1984) was employed to assess children's concepts about the self (about *physical and cognitive competence*, e.g., good at swinging and good at counting) and about acceptance by others (*peer acceptance*, e.g., has friends to play with; and *maternal acceptance*, e.g., mother cooks your favorite foods). This 24-item questionnaire is administered individually and uses a pictorial format and two-point scales. A sample item is: This girl in this picture is good at puzzles (score 2), but that girl is not very good at puzzles (score 1). Which child is most like you?

Also, the behavioral rating scale of presented self-esteem was used to assess the behavioral manifestations of self-esteem in young children (Haltiwanger 1989; Haltiwanger and Harter 1988). It was operationalized as part of children's concept of self. This questionnaire has 15 items and was rated by the child's teacher on a 4-point scale and has a structure alternative format. A sample item is: "Lacks confidence to approach challenging tasks; shies away from challenge" versus "Approaches challenging tasks with confidence." The teacher first has to choose the description that fits the child best and then must decide whether the child is very much or only sort of the child in the description. Based on factor analysis, three dimensions were tapped: *self-esteem* (self-confidence, initiative, setting high goals), *involved* (sociable and assertive), and *positive emotions* (showing joy and pride easily).

Caregiver-Child Relationships. The attachment story completion task (Verschueren and Marcoen 1999) was used to tap children's representations of attachment relationships with mother. Each child was asked to use a Lego Belville doll family to complete three attachment-related story beginnings (the child screams that an unfamiliar child is stealing the child's bicycle, the child gives a present to mother, and the child is yelling that there is a monster in the bedroom). Each of the stories was rated on a five-point scale for *attachment security*. Stories

received a score of 4 or 5 for security if the children portrayed positive and open interactions with a responsive attachment figure and completed the stories with little hesitation. Stories received a score of 1 or 2 for security if the parent-child interactions in the story were minimal, when the child was reluctant to answer the experimenter's probes, or when the child described negative, hostile, or disorganized interactions that could be alternated with scenes of harmonious interactions. A story that was neither clearly secure nor insecure was coded as "in between" and given a score of 3. In the present study, we used the security scores of each of the three stories as indices of attachment representations in further analyses.

In order to measure the quality of the teacher-child relationship the Student Teacher Relationship Scale (Pianta 1996) was employed. It is a 28-item teacher report instrument that assesses a teacher's feelings and beliefs about his or her relationship with a particular pupil, the pupil's interactive behavior with the teacher, and the teacher's beliefs about the pupil's feelings toward the teacher. Three dimensions were distinguished, that is, *conflict*, *closeness*, and *dependency*. The conflict scale contains items such as: "This child and I always seem to be struggling with each other." "This child easily becomes angry with me," and "When this child is in a bad mood, I know we're in for a long and difficult day." The closeness scale includes items such as: "I share an affectionate, warm relationship with this child," "If upset this child will seek comfort from me," and "This child spontaneously shares information about him- or herself." The dependency scale consists of items such as: "This child reacts strongly to separation from me," "This child asks for my help when s/he does not really need help," and "This child is overly dependent on me." Scale scores on conflict, closeness, and dependency were used in further analyses.

To test our theoretical model, structural equation modeling was used with the program Amos (Arbuckle and Wothke 1999) as well as in study two. The results of the analyses will be shown in path diagrams. In these figures, latent variables are drawn in ellipses. Indicator variables are depicted in rectangles. Straight lines with one arrow represent an effect of one variable on another (so-called paths). The path coefficients from a latent variable to indicator variables show how well the latent variable is represented by the indicator variable(s). Curved lines with two arrows represent a covariation between two exogenous (predictor) variables or an error covariation (a covariation between the residuals of two variables) between two endogenous (dependent) variables.

Results and Conclusion, Study 1

First of all, contrary to our expectations, a punishing concept of God was neither related to the mother-child and teacher-child relationship nor to children's concepts of self and others. There were also some predictors (perceived physical and cognitive competence, perceived acceptance by mother, and dependency in the teacher-child relationship) that showed no significant associations with other variables, and, therefore, were skipped in further analyses. Children's attachment representations consisted more of responses to the "present" and "theft" story (respectively .80 and .63; see Figure 1) than the one about the monster (.40, but also significant). The teacher-child relationship was more formed by closeness (.82) than by conflict (−.50). Children's concept of self was predominantly represented by positive emotions, but also significantly by self-esteem and involvement (see Figure 2).

One of the most striking findings in this study is that although the mother-child attachment representation was positively related to the teacher-child relationship, it was not predictive of children's God concept (see Figure 1). Young children with a secure representation of attachment to mother generally had a less discordant and a more close

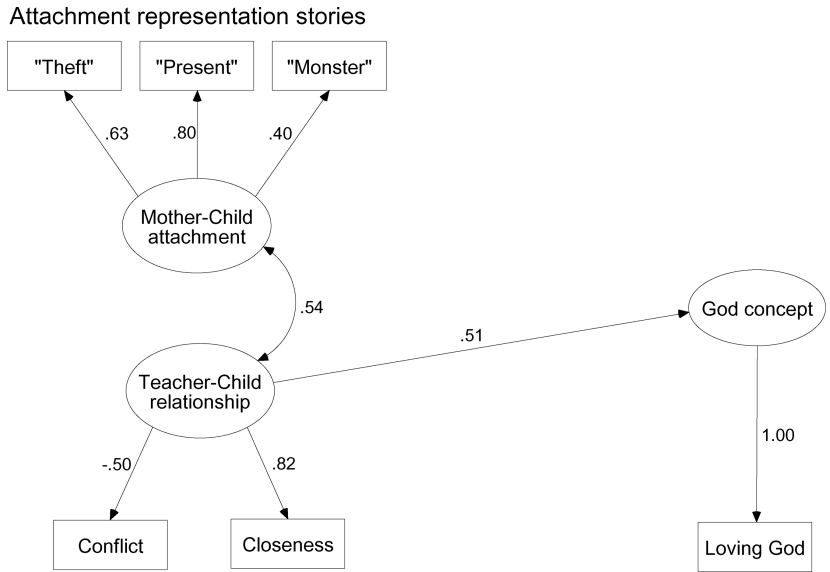


FIGURE 1. Standardized estimates of child-caretaker attachment and the child's God concept.

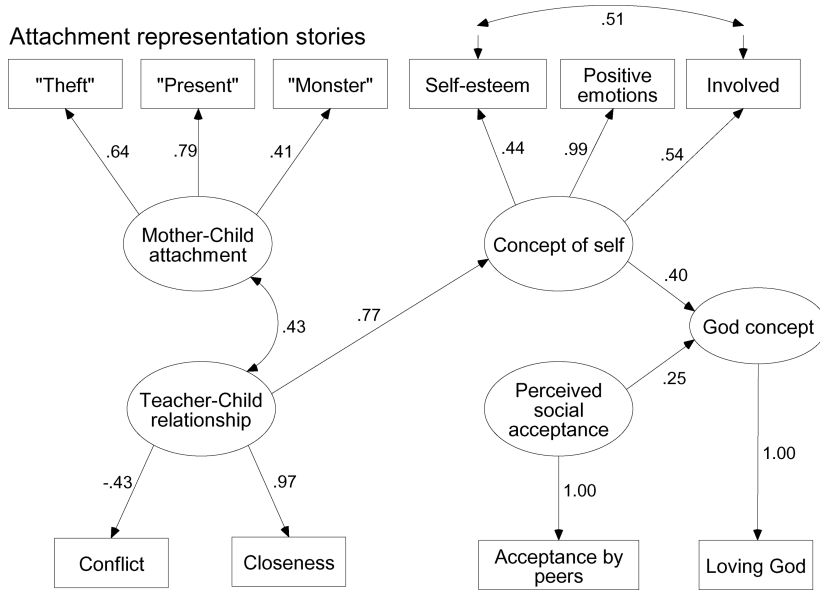


FIGURE 2. Standardized estimates of child-caretaker attachment and the child's God concept mediated by self-concept.

relationship with their teacher than young children with an insecure representation of attachment, but these representations had no effects on children's God concepts.

However, our results give support for the correspondence hypothesis in the case of the teacher-child relationship. A more optimal teacher-child relationship was connected to a more loving concept of God in the kindergartners (see Figure 1). Furthermore, including concepts of self and others in the analysis it was shown that this connection was mediated by the child's self-concept (see Figure 2). That is, young children with a close, open, and harmonious relationship with their teacher showed positive emotions, high involvement in groups and had high self-esteem, which led to a loving, caring God concept. Concepts of others, that is, perceived acceptance by peers was positively related to a loving God image, but was not predicted by attachment. Kindergartners who viewed themselves to be highly accepted by their peers had a more loving God concept than those who felt less accepted by peers.

The findings concerning attachment and children's God concepts in the home and school context may be interpreted in terms of the revised correspondence hypothesis (cf. Granqvist 1998). The children

came mainly from non-believing families, whereas almost all the teachers were religious. The mothers of these children generally were agnostic, and, therefore, following the revised correspondence hypothesis, no association between mother–child attachment and God concepts among the children should be found. In contrast, the majority of teachers were religious, and, therefore, a correspondence between a more optimal teacher–child relationship and children’s God-concepts (here a loving God, God like a responsive attachment figure who loves you, listens to you, and who is like a friend; cf. Kirkpatrick 1992) should be and indeed was found. In a more optimal caregiver–child relationship, children are more inclined to adopt their caregivers’ God concepts than in a less optimal caregiver–child relationship (e.g., less open and close, and more conflictual). However, because in this study caregivers’ God concepts or other aspects of religious socialization were not included, no clear statements about the tenability of the revised correspondence hypothesis can be made.

In other research, De Roos’ team found an indication that the mother–child relationship may be important for children’s concept of God because mother’s concepts influenced children’s views of God as a loving friend or father/parent; the more mothers perceived God as friend, the more their kindergarteners viewed God as a father or loving friend (De Roos et al. 2001a). But again we can not draw conclusions about the revised correspondence hypothesis because the researchers did not examine attachment here. In this same research teachers’ God concepts were found to have effects on young children’s answers to open-ended questions about God. The teachers were predominately liberal Christian. Our results demonstrated that the more teachers experienced God as a father or friend and the more they associated God with positive feelings, the more their pupils referred to biblical words and stories in their descriptions of God. Among a more orthodox Christian sample, it was shown that mothers who have a loving idea of God have preschoolers who view God as powerful, loving, and caring (De Roos et al. 2003; Hertel and Donahue 1995).

STUDY 2

In the second study the two attachment theoretical correspondence hypotheses were investigated, that is, the original *correspondence hypothesis* and the *revised correspondence hypothesis*. We examined the effects of attachment as well as religious socialization

on children's God concepts. The first research question of this study is whether support can be found for the original correspondence hypothesis. If the correspondence hypothesis is right, an independent effect of caregiver-child attachment on children's God concepts should be found regardless of religious socialization. The second research question is the tenability of the revised correspondence hypothesis. This hypothesis incorporates caregivers' religiousness and socialization in the prediction of children's God concepts and other aspects of religiosity. We examined caregivers' God concepts and their goals for religious education as aspects of caregivers' religiousness and socialization. If the revised correspondence hypothesis is true, we expect the securely attached children from religious homes to have a more loving God concept, to be more influenced by their caregivers' goals for religious education, and to have a higher congruence between their own and their caregivers' God concepts than the more insecurely attached religious children. No differences in God concepts between securely and insecurely attached children are expected when both groups experienced low caregiver religiousness.

Method Study 2

Subjects were 198 kindergartners, their mothers, fathers, and teachers. The mean age of the children was 68 months. In this study we worked with a more diverse religious sample than in the first one including three conservative, orthodox Protestant sub-denominations. Among the parents of the study 44% regarded themselves as non-affiliated, 14% were Dutch Reformed, 28% belonged to orthodox Reformed churches, and 14% were Catholic.

All children were interviewed individually by a female examiner in a 45-minute session at school to assess their God concepts and concepts of self and others, as well as attachment representations (see study 1). In the present study caregivers' ideas about the child-caregiver relationship were used as indices of the quality of the child-caregiver attachment relationships. We did not use children's attachment stories here. Also, children's concepts of self and others were not included in this study.

The children were taken from their kindergarten classes to a separate room. The order of the different parts of the interview session was the same for each child. First, in order to get acquainted with the interview procedure and experimenter, the children were asked to draw a picture of God and to tell something about the drawing. Second,

they answered open questions about the nature of God (e.g., what is God, where is God, what is God able to do; not described here further, see De Roos et al. 2001a). After that, they completed scales referring to concepts of self and others. Then, the children were presented a 23-item structured questionnaire concerning potential characteristics of God. Finally, children's mother-child attachment representations were measured.

Children's Concepts of God. Children's God concepts were measured using the same 23-item questionnaire as applied in our first study. However, now we distinguished five scales instead of two. Probably the children of this sample are more able to differentiate among the diverse possible characteristics of God than those of study 1 due to the higher level of religiousness among their parents. The five scales were called *Potency of God*, *Punishing God*, *Positive God*, *Relational God*, and *God like parents*. The scale *Potency of God* has items like: "God sees everything you do," "God is the boss," "God is very strong." *Punishing God* is composed of the following three items: "God punishes often," "God punishes when you are naughty," and "God is angry when you do something bad." *Positive God* alludes to items like: "God helps people," "God cares for people and animals," and "God can comfort you when you're sad." The scale *Relational God* contains four items, namely: "God loves me," "God makes me happy," "God is a friend," and "God is nice." Finally, *God like parents* has two items, that is "God looks like daddy" and "God looks like mummy."

Caregiver-Child Relationships. To measure the quality of the different caregiver-child relationships, mothers, fathers, and teachers completed a shortened version of the Student Teacher Relationship Scale (Pianta 1996). This questionnaire was also used in the first study, but then only to assess the teacher-child relationship. It uses a 5-point Likert-type format. It assesses caregivers' beliefs about the closeness, openness, dependency, and conflict in the relationship with a particular child, the child's interactive behavior with the caregiver, and beliefs about the child's feelings toward the caregiver. On the basis of factor analysis one scale was detected, called *Negative relationship*. The negative relationship scale contains items with high loadings such as: "This child and I always seem to be struggling with each other," "When this child is in a bad mood I know we're in for a long and difficult day," and "This child easily becomes angry with me." The negative relationship scale also consists of items with positive content but high negative

loadings such as: "I share an affectionate, warm relationship with this child," "If upset this child will seek comfort from me," and "This child spontaneously shares information about him- or herself" (thus, the more these items fit the particular caregiver-child relationship, the less negative that relationship is).

Caregivers' God Concepts. Caregivers' God concepts were studied employing a questionnaire. Mothers, fathers, and teachers completed a 25-item questionnaire using a six-point Likert scale. Items are intended to involve God's nurturance and power (cf. Benson and Spilka 1973), that is, "God is caring," "God is comforting," "God is nice," and "God preserves the earth," "God sees everything," "God is strict."

Three scales were found, called *Loving God*, *Strict God*, and *Distant God*. The scale *Loving God* contains items such as "God loves people," "God is patient," "God is caring," "God loves me, even when I do something against His will," and "God is merciful." *Strict God* refers to items like "God condemns," "God punishes," "God is strict," and "God controls me." The scale *Distant God* consist of three items, that is: "God is aloof," "God is not available," and "God is available for believing people only."

Goals for Religious Education. In order to assess caregivers' goals for religious education, mothers, fathers, and teachers completed a questionnaire containing 13 items using a 6-point Likert-type scale, which ranges from 1 = *not at all descriptive of me* to 6 = *highly descriptive of me*. The items are: It's important for me that my children/pupils (1) become good Christians, (2) are in awe for God, (3) learn to critically think about different religions, (4) build a personal relationship with God, (5) get to know stories from the bible, (6) learn to pray, (7) learn to think about what's right and wrong, (8) pay a lot attention to Christian holidays, (9) develop a respectful attitude toward people who adhere to other religions/belief systems than we do, (10) get converted, (11) experience the beneficial effect of the Holy Ghost, (12) learn to choose a religion by themselves, and (13) behave according to Christian norms and values.

Factor analysis yielded 2 scales among the mothers, fathers, and teachers. They were called: *Traditional Religious Education* and *Respect for Other's Religion*. The traditional goals for religious education included objectives such as: to become good Christians, to get converted, to be in awe of God, to get to know stories from the bible, to learn to pray. *Respect for Other's Religion* consists of goals which

underscore the importance for children to think for themselves about right and wrong and to have respect for others.

Results and Conclusion, Study 2

First, we will draw attention to the predictability of the different God concepts of the preschoolers. After that, the results of the tests of both correspondence hypotheses will be presented and discussed. An eye-catching finding is that children's positive, relational, and potent images of God could be predicted by the antecedents studied here, whereas children's punishing God image and God like parents could not. The children referred more often to God as a loving than as a punishing presence. Also, children's punishing God and God like parents were not related to any of the other God concepts of the children. Therefore, these God concepts were skipped from further analyses.

These results and those of study 1 suggest, that, for children at the present time, a loving God concept is more salient than a punishing concept (cf. Hertel and Donahue 1995; Nelsen et al. 1977). In a previous study it was found that although a punishing God concept was less emphasized as a loving God concept, differences in a punishing God concept were found among a number of school denominations (De Roos et al. 2001a). A punishing God concept was more emphasized in Reformed schools than in a Catholic and interdenominational school. A remarkable finding was that the pupils of the religiously neutral state school view God as punishing as the ones of the Reformed schools. It is conceivable that this result is due to the specific population attending this particular state school. All parents of the pupils of this state school were non-affiliated, whereas in our earlier study children of a lot of church members attended state schools as well. It may be that many parents of the present state school doubt the existence of God due to the suffering in the world, do not believe in God or even blame God for wars, disasters, and poverty, which may color their children's view on God in a less loving and more "negative," that is, punishing way.

Recently, it was found that parental childrearing practices predicted children's view of a punishing, strict, and potent God (De Roos et al. 2004). The more parents use strict and power-assertive childrearing techniques, the more their children will view God as angry, punishing, and potent. The more parents emphasize their children's autonomy, the less the children will view God as powerful.

Concerning God like parents it was found in a previous study that 4-year-olds more often say God looks like their parents than 5- and

6-year-olds (De Roos et al. 2003). This was explained by the fact that younger preschoolers are more dependent on their parents than the older ones.

Turning to the test of the original correspondence hypothesis the present study showed that the quality of the caregiver-child attachment relationship is not significantly positively related to children's God concepts. Thus, no support for the original correspondence hypothesis was found. Religious socialization has to be taken into account to explain differences in children's God concepts.

The findings suggest that religious socialization is an important contributor to children's God concepts. The more mothers, fathers, and teachers stressed the value of traditional goals for religious education, the more their kindergarteners perceived God as a positive, potent, powerful, helping, and loving entity (see Figure 3 for the total group). However, the association between religious education and children's God concepts is non-significant (.20) for the group of non-affiliated children, which is in accordance with the revised correspondence hypothesis. A striking result was that respectful religious education was not associated with children's God concepts. It may be that respectful religious education leads to a positive, respectful attitude to people's faith or religion in children and is less related to the content of God concepts. Further research is recommended to test this explanation.

Caregivers' concept of a distant God was not associated with other variables, and, therefore, was left out of further analyses. Caregivers' God concepts affected children's God concepts via these goals. That is, caregivers' ideas of God as loving, comforting, potent, and strict as well as punishing, led them to pursue traditional goals for religious education, which in turn influenced the children's view of God as positive, potent, helping, and loving. Also, the more caregivers perceive God as punishing, the less emphasis they lay on respectful religious education. Caregivers' ideas of a loving God were positively related to those of a punishing God (.81; see Figure 3). The correlation between indicator variables of caregiver punishing God and loving God was highest for fathers (.60), lower for mothers (.32), and lowest for teachers (.17).

In order to test the revised correspondence hypothesis, in further analyses caregiver-child relationships were used as group variable in so-called multigroup models to test differences in associations among religious socialization and children's God concepts between groups of children having no, one, two, or three negative relationships with their caregivers. Children scoring above the median of the negative

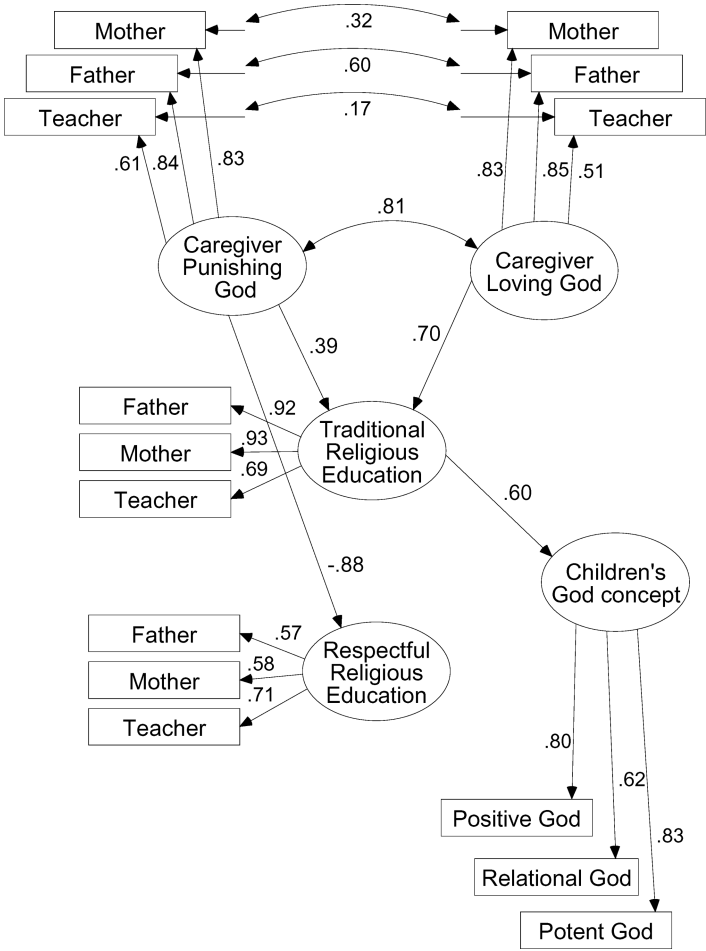


FIGURE 3. Standardized coefficients of the relations among caregivers' God concepts, religious education, and children's God concepts for the complete sample in study 2.

relationship scale concerning a particular caregiver were considered to have a negative relationship with that caregiver, children with scores below the median were regarded to have a positive relationship. We attempted to fit the model of Figure 3 for these groups of children and expected the overall model to be suitable for children having no or only one negative relationship with their caregivers (most relationships are positive). Among children who generally have positive relationships it is supposed that their God concepts will be strongly influenced by their caregivers' socialization. The model is proposed to be

less suited for children having two or three negative relationships with their caregivers because these children predominantly experience less optimal relationships. The socialization process in less optimal relationships should be less successful than in more optimal relationships.

The revised correspondence hypothesis is partly confirmed. Contrary to this hypothesis, it was found that the results of the groups of children having zero, one, or two negative relationships resembled those of the total group. In addition, even children having three negative relationships learn about a potent, powerful and positive, comforting, helping God from the religious education of their parents. The association between traditional religious education and children's God concept for this group is .55. Interestingly, in this group caregivers' God concepts about equally consist of caretaker loving (.49) and punishing God (.55), whereas in the complete sample caregivers' God concepts were more represented by caretaker loving God (.70) than by punishing God (.39) .

However, in line with the revised correspondence hypothesis, in such a negative surrounding these children did not emotionally learn about an intimate, personal bond with God. In a context having three negative relationships, children's God concepts are formed by a positive (.74) and potent (.99) God, but not significantly by a relational God (.33). Children that have negative relationships with all their caregivers are not reinforced to view God as someone that loves them, will make them happy, is nice, and is a friend. When children experience a lot of conflict and feel little openness, closeness, and warmth in all relationships with their caregivers, God is not perceived as a close, personal, and warm entity.

A remarkable finding in the study is that relationships with mother, father, and teacher can compensate for each other in fostering an intimate relationship with God among young children. That is, even when a child has negative relationships with both parents, a teacher can positively influence the development of a perception of God as a loving, kind friend. In addition, teachers' contribution to caregivers' God concepts and traditional religious education was somewhat lower than that of parents, but still significant. Respectful religious education was more represented by the ideas of teachers than those of parents.

FINAL CONCLUSION

In the introduction it was proposed that early caregiver-child attachment should be stronger related to young children's God concepts

than to aspects of adults' religiosity due to young children's dependency on their parents and teachers. However, it seems that attachment is a less strong contributing factor for the development of individual differences in young children's than in adolescents' and adults' God concepts (cf. Kirkpatrick 1999; Granqvist 2002a). Attachment theory partly explained individual differences in young children's God concepts. The revised correspondence hypothesis was to some extent confirmed showing no effect of religious education on children's God concepts among non-affiliated families. Also, support for the (revised) correspondence hypothesis was found in the case of the prediction of an intimate, personal God image. In the first study it was shown that the teacher-child relationship was predictive of a loving God concept among a group of non-affiliated and liberal Christian children. In the second study we demonstrated that children experiencing negative relationships with their parents and teachers are less able to build an intimate relationship with God than children who have at least one positive relationship with one of these three significant adults, partly providing evidence for the revised correspondence hypothesis. The children came from non-affiliated, liberal, and orthodox Christian parents.

Religious socialization in the home as well as in the school context proved to be very important for children's God concept formation. Mothers,' fathers,' as well as teachers' religious denomination, God concepts, and goals for religious education have strong effects on children's images of God. It may be that for the acquisition of a potent and helping God image in young children religious socialization is more influential, whereas for the view of God as an attachment figure (a loving friend) and for the maintenance and personal meaning of certain God concepts in adolescence and adulthood an early positive relationship with at least one significant caregiver is more important. In order to test this explanation and to move the attachment and religion research further in a developmental direction, future studies should be conducted with a prospective longitudinal design in which children's God concepts, caregiver-child relationships, and religious socialization in a home and school context are repetitively measured from young childhood into adolescence.

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